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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the results of a survey that investigated how 69 school districts associated with the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented were implementing cluster grouping to meet the intellectual, social, and emotional needs of gifted students. Results from the survey indicate: (1) the majority of school districts did not have an official policy on cluster grouping; (2) advantages of cluster grouping included cost effectiveness, increases in intellectual stimulation, the ability for students to move rapidly through the curriculum and work in their interest area, and teachers taking more responsibility for the needs of gifted children; and (3) disadvantages to cluster grouping included difficulty in the implementation process, lack of teacher training and funds for inservice, inability to meet the needs of highly gifted students, and resentment toward cluster teachers and gifted students. Recommendations for planning a cluster group are provided and include: develop criteria for selecting students, define the qualifications of and the selection process for the teachers, plan the differentiated experiences for the cluster of gifted students, and plan for support services and special resources. (CR)

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Cluster Grouping Coast to Coast

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Cluster grouping is an administrative procedure in which identified gifted students at a grade level are assigned to one classroom with a teacher who has special training in how to teach gifted students. The other students in their assigned class are of mixed ability. Differentiated instructional opportunities allow gifted students to interact with their intellectual as well as their age peers.Through cluster grouping the intellectual, social, and emotional needs of the gifted students can be addressed.

Cluster grouping has become increasingly popular as a programming option to meet the needs of gifted students in heterogeneous classroom settings (Gentry, 1996; Hoover, Sayler, & Feldhusen, 1993). In 1993 current cluster grouping practices were examined in a nationwide survey. The purpose of the Cluster Grouping Survey was to determine how schools were implementing this programming practice.

The Cluster Grouping Survey had two components. The first, a general survey on cluster grouping was sent in August 1993 to 131 Collaborative School Districts associated with The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) that noted in their application form for the NRC/GT network that their districts used cluster grouping within the regular classroom as part of the organizational structure of their gifted and talented program. Responses were received from 53% (n = 69) of these Collaborative School Districts representing 29 states. The second component of the Cluster Grouping Survey was a more detailed survey sent in September 1993 to 61 Collaborative School Districts that indicated cluster grouping was practiced in their districts at that time. Responses were received from 38% (n = 23) of these districts representing 15 states.

The first Cluster Grouping Survey presented three questions. Respondents were asked if their school district had a policy on cluster grouping. Of the respondents, 17% indicated having an official policy, 17% did not, 62% said they had no official policy, but that cluster grouping was practiced.

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The second question posed was "How does your district define cluster grouping?" Multiple definitions were given. Less than 1% indicated they had state definitions, while 1% noted that students in specific programs or who had specific abilities composed a cluster group. A majority (98%) of the responding schools used a certain number or percentage of students to define a cluster group. Examples ranged from 4-6 identified gifted and talented students in a heterogeneous classroom, to a group of 3-5 students of the top 5% students clustered together. In a large city, 33% of each cluster class were students identified as gifted and talented. Another school district defined cluster grouping as a group of five or more identified students in a classroom, plus any "watch and serve" students (students who are displaying high potential).

The third question on the first survey addressed the grade levels where cluster grouping occurred. Over half (51%) of the respondents indicated that cluster grouping occurred most frequently in the upper elementary grade levels (grade 3-6) in their districts. Of the districts, 5% reported using cluster grouping in kindergarten and ninth grade, 32% reported the use of cluster grouping in the first, second, seventh, and eighth grades, and 12% indicated cluster grouping occurred in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades.

The results of the first Cluster Grouping Survey indicate that while some school districts around the country practice cluster grouping, many did not have official district or school policies regarding its use. Most definitions of cluster grouping were based on a number or percentage of identified gifted and talented students within a regular classroom. The first survey also showed that cluster grouping is a practice used at all grade levels, especially in the upper elementary grades.

The second Cluster Grouping Survey examined a variety of cluster grouping issues in 23 school districts nationwide using this program practice. These issues included: the selection process of cluster students, special populations represented, selection and training of cluster teachers, differences between cluster and non-cluster classrooms, program options used, reactions to cluster grouping, academic and social/affective effects of cluster grouping, and advantages and disadvantages of cluster grouping. The respondents of the survey included: director/coordinator of gifted and talented programs (n = 12), instructional/educational specialist (n = 4), gifted and talented teacher/specialist (n = 2), assistant superintendent (n = 1), principal (n = 2), school psychologist (n = 1), and cluster teacher (n = 1).

Selection Process of Cluster Students

Methods for identifying students for cluster groups varied greatly from district to district. The methods listed were those used by many districts nationwide to identify students for other types of gifted and talented programming. Testing included use of the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT), Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (WISC-R), California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), other IQ achievement tests, and placement tests. Teacher input was sought using behavioral observation forms and recommendations. Parent input was gathered through recommendations and informational forms. Grades and writing skills were included in academic performance, while other considerations examined motivation and student awards.

Special Populations

Responding schools were also asked about the special populations participating in their cluster grouping programs. The following shows the percentage of schools indicating the special populations served:

Native-American-- 38%
African-American-- 52%
Hispanic-American-- 52%
Asian-American-- 52%
Pacific Islander-- 17%
Economically Disadvantaged-- 82%
Limited English Proficient-- 30%
Learning Disabled-- 65%
Physically Disabled-- 35%
Underachievers-- 65%
Emotionally Disturbed-- 35%

Selection and Training of Cluster Teachers

Principal discretion was the method noted 40% of the time in the selection of the cluster classroom teachers. Other selection methods included: rotation of regular staff, volunteers (based on interest and willingness), selection after training, former gifted and talented teachers, and peer panel selection. Of the respondents, 22% indicated that teachers needed to be willing to receive training in order to be a cluster teacher. Responses varied from state mandated teacher training to none. Training included district sponsored inservice, ranging from extensive (after school workshops, one week workshops, 1-3 days for beginning cluster teachers) to one day presentations. Additional methods of training cluster teachers included: attending state conferences and/or University of Connecticut--Confratute, graduate courses, reading articles, using gifted and talented consultants, and visiting other schools. Although several respondents (n = 4) indicated no ongoing inservice training, a majority (60%) of the districts offered some type of training. These included: monthly meetings, a quarterly study group and team meeting, gifted/talented inservices, cluster network/inservice days, and four follow-up training sessions per year. Occasional workshops and seminars, and attendance at state conferences were also noted. The districts with the most inservice support reported the greatest satisfaction with cluster grouping and the most positive reactions from teachers, administrators, parents, and students.

Differences Between Cluster and Non-Cluster Classrooms

All of the schools indicated that the major difference between the cluster and non-cluster classroom was in the greater "qualitatively different" instruction that was occurring. This included the accelerated presentation pace, the increased depth of enrichment activities and presentation of issues, and a compacted core curriculum.

Program Options Used

Content differentiation, thinking skills, and content enrichment were the most widely noted options used in the responding school districts' cluster grouping programs. Almost all (99%) of the respondents indicated using content enrichment, 91% used thinking skills, and 74% used content differentiation in the cluster classrooms. A variety of content differentiation methods were listed: more acceleration, compacting the core curriculum, more indepth enrichment, and more complex content. Also mentioned were acceleration of presentation pace, a greater focus on higher level thinking and reasoning skills, more pretesting of materials, and extensions of all lessons using higher rder thinking activities. One district stated that the level of awareness of individual needs was greater, that collaborative teaching (cluster teacher and gifted and talented teacher) was stressed, and that whole class enrichment of all K-12 classes was ongoing.

Reactions to Cluster Grouping

Although all of the responding school districts indicated positive reactions of most teachers, administrators, parents, and students to cluster grouping, 30% also noted some mixed reactions. While one respondent said that ". . . by recognizing that high ability students have educational needs that must be addressed daily, teachers were given permission by the 'system' to utilize effective strategies and techniques every day with those students in their classrooms," another said someteachers were philosophically opposed to gifted programs in their district. One respondent noted, "Teachers continue to express concern about the difficulty they experience in providing differentiation within a classroom with a wide range of possibilities." This was less of a problem in schools that limited this range in the cluster classroom.

All of the school districts reported positive reactions by parents to cluster grouping, while only 1% also noted some negative reactions. Parents frequently commented on the positive reactions to the accelerated pace and instruction in the classroom. They believe that cluster grouping was successful in meeting their children's academic needs. Parents preferred cluster grouping to total heterogeneous classrooms and saw the need for grouping to ensure provisions for high ability students were available. One respondent stated that parents of less able students in the cluster classroom had commented on the improved attitude of their children toward school, while another indicated that parents of non-identified students often requested their children be placed in a cluster classroom. Negative reactions included remarks that some parents didn't see anything different happening; some parents of non-identified, high-achieving students didn't like it; and some parents preferred homogeneous grouping in specific content areas.

The reaction of administrators to cluster grouping was mixed, but most (69%) of the respondents gave positive reports. "Supportive," "favorable," "helpful to everyone," "proponents" were remarks noted. One respondent stated, "The administrators have led the way in allowing us to do whatever is best and works to benefit the students." Most respondents, however, gave a variety of administrative reactions including: active support, supportive if good things are happening for kids, and ignoring policy. One respondent stated, "Those with sufficient understanding of the needs of the g/t students support the grouping. Other responses vary dependent on personal beliefs and experiences." While administrative support was seen by several districts as critical to the success of cluster grouping, 13% reported negative responses by administrators. Administrator resentment of a special group, scheduling difficulties, and strong biases against

programming for gifted and talented kids were comments given.

Nearly all (90%) of the respondents indicated gifted students were very positive about being in a cluster classroom. Comments such as "excitement with moving through material without having to wait for others to catch up," "enjoying their intellectual peers," and being "very eager to be challenged" were related. Only two negative remarks were given. One indicated a few students developing a "superior" attitude, and the other was a student's social separation from friends.

Academic and Social/Affective Effects

Cluster grouping may have a positive effect on the achievement of all students (Gentry, 1996). This was the case in the Cluster Grouping Survey. Three categories of responses developed from the question, "What academic effects of cluster grouping have you observed?" For identified highly gifted students, the academic effects were all positive. Respondents listed positive effects for this group of students, including: more time to work together on appropriate tasks; higher class expectations; more indepth and quality products; increased motivation and learning; more opportunities for above level instruction; increased student responsibility and level of change, and finally, more time to work with intellectual peers. Positive effects were also noted for the whole class. Remarks included: ". . . others in class are stimulated," "class expectations are higher," "raises everyone's level of achievement," and "everyone benefits." Teachers also recognized the positive impacts. A typical teacher response stated "cluster grouping gives them [teachers] an opportunity to pace the curriculum faster, that training has helped instruction, and there is a better understanding of the learning process and how to challenge kids." Another response indicated cluster grouping "compels the teaching staff to do more formal differentiation of the curriculum," thereby increasing the academic levels of all. In a major city, achievement gains continued to occur in schools with cluster grouping programs that had clearly stated goals and objectives, ongoing staff development, curriculum differentiation, school-wide enrichment for all students, and parental involvement (Duncan, 1989). These findings concur with those in Qualitative Extension of the Learning Outcomes Study (Delcourt & Evans, 1994). Students in this grouping arrangement (Within Class) as well as Pull-Out programs "felt more capable in their academics, preferred more challenges in the classroom, and were more likely to want to work independently than their peers in Separate Class programs" (p. 4).

Except for two responses that indicated negative effects of cluster grouping (possible development of cliques and some "elitist" tendencies in cooperative learning groups), all the responses to the social and affective effects of cluster grouping were positive. These included: a focus on self-management and decision-making skills fostering a climate of caring and cooperativeness; a support system among peers; a productive, helpful environment that promoted an understanding that the world has many "different" people who can all get along; a better acceptance of being gifted, better self-esteem and friendships; an increased awareness of the talents of all students; an acceptance of students who are not age-peers (cross-grade clustering); and a recognition of students' self-confidence and self- reliance. One school district reported better support for academically talented students, both from their peers and the entire staff since implementing cluster grouping.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The Cluster Grouping Survey also asked the Collaborative School Districts about the advantages and disadvantages of cluster grouping in their school districts. The responses were many and varied. From cost effectiveness (students staying in neighborhood schools, better use of limited resources and time) to viewing the classroom as a "laboratory" for staff development and instructional practices, cluster grouping was seen by 100% of the respondents as an organizational option that offered improvement in many ways.

An increase in intellectual stimulation, challenge, and level of expectations for students were advantages listed. Students were also allowed to move rapidly through the curriculum and work in their interest area. In addition, positive consequences for teachers were noted, including teachers taking more responsibility for the needs of gifted kids and allowing them to group students by need. Administratively, cluster grouping was seen as easier to observe and to guarantee differentiation. It was a more efficient delivery of services; all students at all grade levels could be served.

Advantages of cluster grouping could also be found in the affective domain. A better understanding of the gifted and talented student was found, as well as being able to offer a more challenging curriculum. Better opportunities to address the psychological needs and concerns of high ability students were noted. More and improved exposure to instruction and activity encouraged and fostered the abilities of all students. Many districts stated that expectations were higher for the whole class.

When they were asked about the disadvantages of cluster grouping, only two districts stated that they had not experienced any problems or disadvantages in their districts. Almost all (91%) of the respondents indicated difficulty in the implementation process. Several noted that it was difficult for traditionally trained teachers to change their methods of teaching. A lack of teacher training and funds for inservice were also mentioned. One respondent stated, "The move to heterogeneous grouping . . . is very detrimental to our program. We used to be able to service kids from several programs at once. If we do that within each class, the students who need differentiated curriculum only get 1/4 the service. Collaboration time has not been built into this new plan, and teachers feel too busy to work with us." Not meeting the needs of highly gifted or high ability non-identified students through this delivery method was also a concern expressed by 1% of the respondents. Resentment toward cluster teachers and gifted students was also seen as a disadvantage. Less than 1% of the respondents expressed concerns over cluster grouping leading to tracking and slighting students in non-clustered classrooms. One respondent stated that "theory was still better than practice in some schools."

Recommendations

The Cluster Grouping Survey found that many districts around the country are using cluster grouping in various ways and obtaining positive results. Districts exploring the cluster grouping option need guidance in planning an effective program, however. Kaplan (1974) developed a list of items that need to be addressed in planning a cluster group:

1.Develop criteria for selecting students.
2.Define the qualifications of, and the selection process for, the teachers.
3.Plan the differentiated experiences for the cluster of gifted students.
4.Plan for support services and special resources.

From the responses to the Cluster Grouping Survey, it is recommended that a school district adopt a formal policy on cluster grouping for gifted students before selecting students. Coleman (1995) also suggests schools examine the attributes of true cluster grouping during the planning process.

As Kaplan indicated, the selection of cluster teachers is very important. Weber and Battaglia (1982) list qualities a cluster teacher should have, including a willingness to: understand the unique attributes and needs of talented students; be intellectually alive; be creatively productive; be flexible and willing to find appropriate outlets for student products; be attuned to the process of teaching, not just the content; be a role model for students; and be able to foster positive feelings among students and faculty toward the gifted and talented program. Rogers (1991) adds that the cluster teacher must also be sufficiently trained to work with high ability students, and be given an adequate amount of preparation time. The cluster teacher should also be willing "to devote a proportionate amount of classroom time to the direct provision of learning experiences for the cluster group" (p. 4).

In planning and providing for the experiences of gifted students in the cluster group, Coleman (1995) suggests that cluster teachers use the following strategies: curriculum compacting, acceleration of the content, enrichment with the curriculum areas, interest-based learning, and opportunities to work with other high ability learners across grade levels. Delcourt and Evans (1994) state that "curricular and instructional provisions for the gifted must be carefully maintained lest they disintegrate into a no-program format" (p. 9).

Support and special services are essential components for cluster grouping to be effective. Responses from the Cluster Grouping Survey indicate the need for these services. Coleman (1992) states that a cluster teacher should have access to a consultative/collaborative teacher who is a specialist in meeting the needs of high ability students. Access to counseling services is also necessary to meet the social and emotional needs of the cluster students.

The results of the Cluster Grouping Survey support research studies (Gentry, 1996; Hoover, Sayler, & Feldhusen, 1993) that gifted students do benefit from this program approach. Planning and delivery of the services need to be carefully considered, however, if cluster grouping is to be successful in meeting the needs of high ability students in regular classrooms.

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